

"Getting Right With God"

Jonah 3 is a story of people who have been far from God suddenly getting right with him. I read the story of a personal conversion just this week. Warren Primus was an atheist who said he simply had no need for God. When he married his college girlfriend, they made sure there was no reference to God at the wedding. God had no place in their lives. But they suffered a tragedy. His wife became pregnant with twins. The twins were born prematurely and died a day later. He said the surprising thing was this all changed his wife's heart but not way he would have thought. She said it made her want to know God. She said it with such conviction that it impacted him. He didn't feel the same way - not at all. However, the tragedy did force him to see that to deny the existence of God was to deny any purpose or meaning to life, and that realization became deeply disturbing.

Ironically, his sister, who was also an atheist, had given him the book *Mere Christianity* by CS Lewis. A classic, compelling defense of faith. She thought he might be interested in it. One evening, he started reading it, and as he read it, it was like something came to life in him. Let me read you what he says at this point. *"So, I set the book down to think, and this thought came into my head that I did not put there. It just said, 'I'm a sinner.'* (Somewhere along the line, he had heard what some Christians call *the sinner's prayer*, and he knew this is how it begins, so this kind of spooked him. But let me read on.) *This thought came in from the other side and said, 'Think about it later.' 'Think about it later.' 'I am a sinner.' 'Think about it later.' There was this battle going on in my mind. And I felt like I was hanging onto something, trying to let go and saying, 'Okay, I believe I am a sinner, and I deserve to go to hell, and Jesus died for my sins, and I trust you with my life.'* And so, *just in my head, I said the prayer that I had been taught of how to become a Christian. Just like that, (he writes:) I knew something had changed, and a peace came over me that I had never experienced.*

As I was reading that story, I thought about **Jonah 3:1-10** because it's also the story of a radical conversion. It's a story that reminds us both whole societies and individual people can find themselves deeply at odds with God, facing his righteous judgment, and weirdly oblivious. ***God uses this story to teach us that he is both a God of steadfast love and a God of righteous judgment. And therefore, we need to be sure that we get right with him. Repentance is how we do that.***

I. WHEN WE ARE AT ODDS WITH GOD THERE'S NO GREATER NEED THEN GETTING RIGHT WITH HIM.

That's what's behind **Jonah 3:1-2**. It says, *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.”* This is the second time the word of the Lord comes to Jonah. The first time, he ran from God's calling, but God pursued him and gave him another chance, and this time, like a parent with a disobedient child, God says, *Go to Nineveh and just do what I tell you – say what I tell you to say!* **Verse 4** *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* Jonah needs to get right with God. The Ninevites need to get right with God. We all need to get right with God.

That is the most fundamental imperative of life...

A. It is a compelling imperative because the God of steadfast love is also a God of righteous judgment.

God is a righteous judge. **Genesis 18:25** says, *Will not the judge of all the earth do right?* The answer is emphatically yes, he will. That's crucial. Think of all the terrible conflicts we see at a global level, the wars and human suffering. Think of all the intellectual questions and cultural issues in our society. We try to weigh out what's right, what's wrong, Who should be punished, who should be supported, and to what degree? The Bible answers many of questions, for us but ultimately, it assures us that while our judgments are imperfect, God is the true and righteous judge. He knows all things, he weighs all things, he has compassion and in the end his judgments stand as righteous.

I often find people like the idea of God as a father, a friend, a helper, and a Savior but not so much as a judge. **Yet, at some level, this is critical to life having meaning.** Arthur Miller is a famous American playwright. In one of his plays called *After the Fall*, there's a character who says that his life began to fall apart when denial of the reality of God led him to the conclusion that there is no judge and, therefore, there is no verdict on anything. There's only an endless argument within our own hearts and with each other about what's right and wrong and good and important and those endless arguments that go on in our hearts are meaningless because if there is no ultimate judge in the universe. So you never get a verdict on anything. The denial of God as our judge starts out feeling like total liberation, but it ends up being complete meaninglessness. When this dawned on him he said it was the beginning of despair and disaster.

The same Bible that assures us of God's love teaches and warns us about his judgments. Adam and Eve expelled from the garden, the world under the curse of brokenness, the great flood in the days of Noah, God judging the nations at the tower of Babel. All of that is in just the first half of the first book! You read on and see God's judgment on Egypt, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Israelites who worship the golden calf, the Babylonians and Assyrians. The stories of God's judgment don't end in the Old Testament. The entire New Testament, is colored by the certainty of a coming day of judgment and the truth that we should live in light of that.

2 Peter 3 says, in the last days, it'll be like in the days of Noah when people scoffed at and dismissed the thought of God's coming judgment. And then there is this strong assurance that comes, **2 Peter 3:9**, *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, (... the promise of the day of judgment mentioned 2 verses earlier) but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

Rico Tice, is a friend of Barry's. He wrote a book on the topic of speaking honestly with people about faith in Christ. In it he says,

sometimes loving people means warning them. And he tells a story of being in Australia visiting a friend. They go to this particular beach and he starts to take his shirt off and thinks he's going to go jump in the water and his friend says "what are you doing?" He said: "I'm going for a swim." The friend said: "What about those signs?" He looks and the sign says,— *Danger: Sharks!*" He writes, "With all the confidence of an Englishman abroad, I said: 'Don't be ridiculous— I'll be fine.'" This friend said: "Listen mate, 200 Australians have died in shark attacks—you've got to decide whether those shark signs are there to save you or to ruin your fun. You're of age—you decide." He didn't go swimming.

God warns us! On the one hand we're seeing this with regard to a whole society like that of Nineveh but he also, is at the same time, doing it personally for Jonah. God does this for you and for me. He uses imperfect servants like Jonah to warn us. He uses providential circumstances to warn us. He wants us, whenever and to whatever degree we are at odds with him, to get right with him.

To get right with God; that is a compelling imperative. And...

B. It is a hopeful imperative because the God of steadfast love persists in pursuing sinners and strugglers.

Everybody is offered grace. In the book of Jonah, both the Ninevites and Jonah are shown grace. In the end everybody is called to repentance. Nineveh is described as a great city. It's also called a wicked city. It doesn't matter how big or bad, how great or ungodly you are. God's call to get right with him is an act of grace that offers mercy to everyone. Everyone in this story seems to understand that. Although the word of warning doesn't spell it out explicitly, the fact of the warning itself suggests the possibility of mercy and forgiveness *if* they repent.

The good news, the gospel Jesus and the apostles preached, is good news because of the promise of grace. Jesus spoke of God's judgment to awaken our need to get right with God *so that* we turn to Christ in repentance trusting him as our Savior! In doing that, we receive mercy and salvation. **Romans 8:1** *there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* The first application from a passage

about judgment is that you need the repentance and faith that turns to Christ and finds salvation in him. But there is another application. As Christians, the fact that we do not have to fear condemnation does not mean we will not face any judgment from God. **Romans 14:12** *So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.* One day, all of us are going to stand before our Lord and Savior. We will look back on our lives with an inescapable clarity, and we will all be accountable for what we have done for Him with the grace he has given us. There is the reality of judgment in this life, also. In a passage about how we take communion in First Corinthians, the God tell us to examine ourselves. Until Jonah spoke the Ninevites felt no need to do anything. Maybe you are happily oblivious to and neglectful of an issue God wants you to address. Don't wait for some Jonah. Ask God to show you. **1 Corinthians 11:31-32.** *But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.* This is what happened with Jonah and it happens with us too.

I wonder are we listening? Do we understand the issues in our lives? I think about you and I wonder if there are some of you who've never really come to Christ receive him and his saving grace. I look at my own heart and I look at those of us who are gathered here and I wonder - are all of us paying attention? Maybe it's not your eternal salvation that's at risk but it's the fullness of life God wants for you – for us, the things he wants to do in and through us that's being compromised by some way in which we're out of sorts with God.

Whenever we are not right with God, we need to know that...

II. THE WAY TO BE IN A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS THE WAY OF FAITH AND REPENTANCE

A. What does this story teach us about a repentance that is met with God's mercy and compassion?

At least six things...

1st Repentance begins with believing God. Verse 5 says they believed God. When **verse 6** says when *the word reached the king,*

scholars point out that the little word “reached” is literally “touched.” Repentance begins with being touched by and believing God by believing God’s word. Believing leads to all kinds of changes.

2nd Healthy repentance is sincerely humble. Verse 5, *They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.* Sackcloth was rough – sort of like burlap. In putting on sackcloth, you were humbling yourself. Stiff stubbornness surrenders to God.

3rd, Healthy repentance is for everyone. Verse 5 says, *all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.* **Verse 6** adds *The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.* All these things are outward expressions of humility. I imagine not everybody was equally evil, yet everybody was equally in need of repentance. That's the way repentance works. Each and everyone of us stand before God needing to repent and to humble ourselves.

4th Healthy repentance is prayerful. In **verse 8**, the king calls on the people to *call out mightily to God.* True repentance isn't turning from your sin to just walk on alone in the strength of your own will and in the power of your resolve. It's always turning from your sin back into a right relationship with God, and prayer is the heartbeat of that relationship.

5th Healthy repentance is hopeful but not presumptuous. Verse 9 says, *Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.*” True repentance is not some kind of bargain or contract that you hammer out with. It doesn't put God in a position of indebtedness to you. It just puts you right with God.

6th Healthy repentance is wholehearted. Verses 7-8 end with the call for everyone *to turn from their evil ways.* Leading up to this the king proclaims that even the animals are to quit eating and drinking and cry out to God. The Hebrew also literally says they are to cloth themselves with sackcloth. Now the text doesn't say they did this it says the king said this. Eating and drinking is what animals in the field do all day long and clothing themselves is rare to say the least. But the point of the

passage in the king's passion. This isn't telling us what the animals did. It is telling us how the king felt. He's going public saying, *I want everybody, every living thing in my kingdom, to be "all in," heart deep, repenting in every way.*

The lesson for us is that true repentance doesn't say *how far do I have to go, how little can I get by with, how carefully can I dole out my devotion? I don't want to do any more than I have to. True repentance may look different in the details, but it will be all in and heart-deep. The call to heart-deep repentance is not harsh because repentance is not a punishment. It's a healing.* It's not bondage; it is the only true liberation. God, who is full of grace, compassion, and abounding love, is the one who calls us to return to him with all our hearts.

B. Repentance is not just for the sinful Ninevites but also for the self-righteous Jonahs.

God's steadfast love allows us to start over again. **Jonah 3** begins: *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."* These words are almost exactly parallel to the opening words of the book of Jonah. God is telling Jonah he needs to start over again. The one who thinks he is better than the people of Nineveh needs to consider the fact that *he* didn't do what God told him to do. He was self-righteous and self-centered and ran from God's call. But, *The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time.* That's also the persistence of His grace. You see the same principle in Abraham, Moses, Peter, and others. God calls you to do something, and maybe you turn a deaf ear head off on a course of disobedience, and he pursues you, disciplines you, sends a storm, and when you've had enough, you cry out for his help, and he lifts you up, and then He says, He still wants you to join him in the work he is doing in the world. God gives second chances, third chances, and more. His grace is that persistent with sinful societies and self-righteous, self-willed servants. In the end in **verse 10** God shows mercy and compassion and the disastrous judgment doesn't fall on Nineveh.

God's steadfast love requires us to start over again. Jonah had been through a storm at sea, nearly drowned, swallowed by a great fish. The fish puked him up on the shore. And God says, "*Jonah, that was entertaining. Now, start over.*" God doesn't say, "*You must be exhausted. Why don't you just rest.*" God says, "*Get up, wipe off that fish phlegm; go to Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.*"

CONCLUSION

Jesus is, of course, far greater than Jonah. **Matthew 12:41**, Jesus said to unrepentant people in his day, *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.* Jesus was referring to himself. He is greater than Jonah in so many ways. Not the least of which is the fact that when called with a difficult calling, instead of running away, He walked and obeyed all through his life and, in the end, all the way to the cross to lay down his life and suffer the judgment we deserve for us. **John 3:17** says, *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* But you have to come to him and get right with God by turning to him and trusting in him, and then the same way you come to him is how you keep going deeper with him and growing throughout the rest of your Christian life.

There is a warning in this story in that there comes a time when the opportunity for repentance ends. Jonah was told to say: "*Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.*" Hebrews scholars say the word *overturned* has a double meaning. Forty more days, and one way or another, Nineveh will be turned over. It's either going to be turned upside down through a repentance of the heart or through the judgment of God. Think about it. Maybe you've got forty days, forty weeks, months? I don't know. But there comes a time when your heart is hardened, or the season of grace is gone, or the kids are grown up, or the marriage is over. Or you've died. It is too late one way or another. I don't know. But I know this: As I come to the Lord's Supper at the end of our service, I want to say to God: "*Lord, search me and know me, and show me anywhere and everywhere I need to repent.*"

Give me the grace to repent and to respond in glad obedience to your word to me today.” I invite you to do the same.

Amen